

Cultural Diversity and Collaborative Governance in Central Dandenong

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Abstract: This paper reports preliminary findings from a study sponsored by the ESRC about collaborative governance under austerity. While the study involved the comparison of experiences of 'austerity' and 'collaboration' between eight Western cities, the focus of this paper is the unique experience of collaboration in urban governance in Dandenong, Melbourne. In particular, our research examined distinct forms of collaboration that have occurred under recent conditions of urban policy and funding reprioritisations (2005-2017). In addition to uncovering general details about collaborative structures and stresses, we have discovered that cultural diversity has played a unique role in both defining modes of collaboration as well as the direction of urban revitalisation.

Cultural diversity may be typical of many Australian cities since World War Two, where scholarship has long noted the dynamism, fluidity and positivity of new cultural inflows within expansive urbanisation. However, less is known about the ways in which cultural diversity influences collaborative modes of urban governance. This paper elucidates the specific ways cultural diversity is supported locally in Dandenong and, in turn, used in collaboration. Specifically, it describes a starting position of widespread support for multiculturalism and mutual understanding in the community linked to the distinctive morphology and socio-ethnic functioning of the city. It also describes the multiple forms of engagement and collaboration between actors in revitalisation, such as more traditional forms of engagement between government and non-government actors as well as new forms of political action led by cultural groups to influence the trajectory of urban policy.

Key words: *collaborative governance; diversity; revitalisation; urban policy; Dandenong*

Introduction

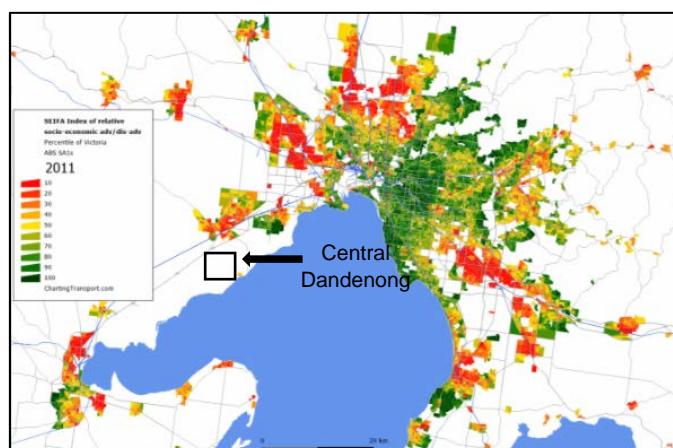
Within the milieu of evolving modes of urban governance, one little understood phenomenon is how forms of collaboration have been affected by welfare reform and governments' spending reprioritisations over recent decades. The objective of this research is to discover the way different social actors collaborate to further their interests given deepening crises of welfarism across the West. Eight cities were chosen to explore the differentiated ripple effects of this crisis in relation to urban governance practices. This paper relates to one of these case studies, exploring the impact of changing government spending patterns on the way actors have collaborated in an urban area undergoing revitalisation in Melbourne's southeast. In particular, it focuses on the way cultural diversity has played a unique role in the way collaboration occurs and in influencing the process of urban revitalisation.

Central Dandenong was selected as the site of our Melbourne case study because it is emblematic of two major trends. First, it epitomises the experience of localities negatively affected by macroeconomic restructuring over recent decades: in particular, a turn away from manufacturing and subsequent rising unemployment. Second, it became an area of high relative disadvantage in the metropolitan context (ABS 2001, 2006, 2011) at a time when a neoliberalising socio-political system produced the extensive retreat of the State from social affairs in favour of strategic and targeted planning interventions (Healey, 2006, Vigar, 2009, Albrechts, 2004). In Melbourne, the trend towards place-based and integrated planning (Lawson, 2005, Gleeson, 2005) can be seen with the introduction of federal programs like Integrated Local Area Planning (ILAP) and the Better Cities Program (BCP) which commenced in the early 1990s or state level initiatives, such as the Transit Cities Program (2002-2010), Neighbourhood Renewal (2001 to present) and successive urban revitalisation programs (from Docklands in the 1990s to Geelong now). 'Revitalising Central Dandenong' is a targeted, State-sponsored renewal initiative that fits this broad trend in urban policy and, for this reason, was of interest to this study of forms of actor collaboration in urban governance.

RCD was initially proposed as a Victorian State Government initiative in the late 1990s and was formally introduced and funded by the in 2005 as a response to declining employment, urban decay and rising social challenges (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2011). The strategy is still being implemented by the Victorian Government's urban development agency, Places Victoria (PV), with broad involvement from the City of Greater Dandenong (CoGD). It is representative of the global trend towards 'hybrid' governance in urban policy that emerged in the 1990s and has deepened since this time (Skelcher et al., 2013). In this regard, RCD and other policy initiatives in Central Dandenong

provided grounds to explore collaboration as it currently occurs, as well as the evolution of governance practices and public spending patterns over a critical time period regarding changes in governance and spending (including investigating the impact of the Global Financial Crisis). We have conducted case study research into these themes through the examination of public records and semi-structured interviews with twenty-five social actors to date from the Victorian Government, City of Greater Dandenong, private and community sectors between February 2016 and August 2017. The research will continue over the remainder of 2017, in our case with a particular focus on cultural diversity and collaborative governance.

Figure 1. Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage/Disadvantage, 2011



Source: ChartingTransport.com, 2013

Public Policy and Spending in Central Dandenong, Victoria

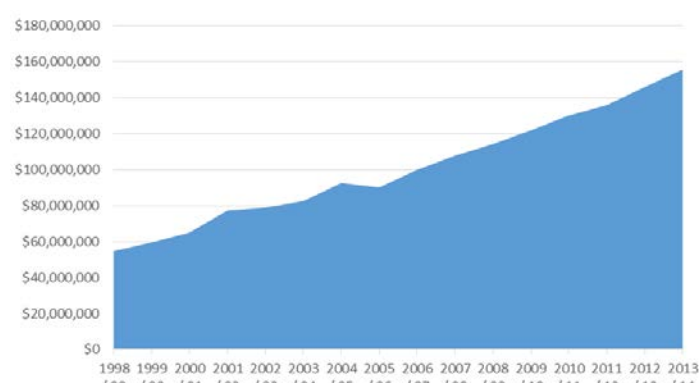
As the title of the comparative research project suggests, this study examines ‘Collaborative Governance under Austerity’ and compares findings between the eight city cases. In the Australian context, we have found that austerity is not a common trope in contemporary political or public discourses and has appeared only as a minor article of scholarship that examines governance locally.¹ Instead, where public spending has been reduced over recent decades it is often tied to the deployment of ‘economic rationalism’ (Uhr and Walter, 2014). While the form of fiscal conservatism adopted in Australia under neoliberalism has transformed macro-economic structures and processes like in other Western contexts, there has been an ongoing focus on inclusive growth with some forms of social protection and investment. When discussing public spending patterns, interviewees suggested that while some ‘efficiency measures’ or ‘cutbacks’ have occurred over recent decades, in particular in relation to universal social programs, so far this has involved a “matter of nips and tucks,” “a bit of service redesign”, “the introduction of savings targets and productivity dividends” or “management by attrition” (various interviewees). There has, on the other hand, been increased investment in specific place-based programs.

It is within this context that the project to ‘revitalise’ Central Dandenong emerged, an area beset by high levels of disadvantage that has suffered as a result of contracting public spending in universal social programs, but has become the focus of targeted investment in place-based planning. The planning policy at the time the project was introduced (2005) was strongly shaped by the goal to strengthen Melbourne’s various ‘Activity Centres’, which are areas that would concentrate retail, commercial, residential and service functions to serve surrounding catchment populations. Overall, the State Government developed this initiative for Central Dandenong to “fulfil its role in a polycentric model” (Local government representative, CoGD) and because of the clear impact of manufacturing decline since the 1980s, the displacement of activity in the centre as a result of poorly planned shopping centre development (Urban Planner, CoGD) and the “dysfunctionality that had occurred in terms of small parcels of land, with small local investors,” which necessitated State intervention to activate local development (former Member of Parliament, Victorian Government).

¹ For example, Dollery and Johnson DOLLERY, B. & JOHNSON, A. 2005. *Enhancing efficiency in Australian local government : an evaluation of alternative models of municipal governance*, Armidale. used it to describe the permanent state of fiscal under-resourcing for municipal government in Australia.

The State Government of Victoria invested \$290 million in 2005 for the RCD project and more recently has funded hard infrastructure (e.g. road crossing removals 2014/15, 'Little India' precinct recognition 2016) as well as in major social programs (e.g. hospital upgrade, anti-domestic violence programs). At the local level, general spending in the City of Greater Dandenong has increased steadily since the late 1990s (See Figure 2. below) and over the period of the project so far, local government spending on major projects has reached approximately \$100 million, including upgrading the Dandenong market and theatre, as well as new projects like the council offices and Dandenong library (see Table 1). These figures demonstrate that government spending in Central Dandenong has been high over the last decade to support the revitalisation program. A place based intervention like RCD is highly representative of Australian fiscal conservatism, cased as efficient as well as effective means to address localised disparities in targeted ways, often with private sector involvement. So while cuts to spending in some areas of public policy might occur, local fiscal conservatism has included high spending through place-based approaches.

Figure 2. Local government spending by City of Greater Dandenong Council 1998-2014



Source: Chart developed with data from annual reports, City of Greater Dandenong, 1999-2014

Table 1. Local Government Expenditure, Major Projects in Central Dandenong 2005-2014

Major Projects	Year	Expenditure
Drum Theatre	2005 / 06	\$13,000,000.00
Dandenong produce market	2006 / 07	\$1,278,153.00
Dandenong produce market upgrade	2008 / 09	\$4,420,000.00
Dandenong produce market upgrade	2009 / 10	\$12,800,000.00
280 Lonsdale Street improvements	2010 / 11	\$1,301,000.00
Dandenong Market major works	2010 / 11	\$1,377,400.00
Municipal Building Project	2011 / 12	\$5,780,000.00
Municipal Building Project	2012 / 13	\$23,160,000.00
Municipal Building Project	2013 / 14	\$33,640,000.00
Dandenong Market major works	2013 / 14	\$1,740,000.00
Afgan Bazaar Streetscape Improvement	2013 / 14	\$1,100,000.00
TOTAL		\$99,596,553.00

Source: Table developed with data from annual reports, City of Greater Dandenong, 2005-2014

While public expenditure has been relatively high in Central Dandenong since 2005, state government spending commitments have fluctuated between administrations. Interviewees contended that changing patterns of public investment in Central Dandenong are not in any way part of a broader austerity agenda, rather they are a reflection of each major party's political ideology as well a pattern of decision-making tied to a desire to accumulate political capital.

In terms of political ideology, the history of investment in infrastructure and revitalisation in Central Dandenong highlights how a Labor governments have adopted a more interventionist approach to address market failure and pursue particular policy goals, while the Liberal National Party promoted less government participation in pursuing market-based approaches. As the local federal member emphasised, it is "virtually impossible to imagine conservative governments in Australia at the state or federal level embarking on land acquisition, planning changes, and direct investment in the way that the government did there" (in Central Dandenong). As other interviewees affirmed, the LNP "weren't believers in the approach" to urban renewal: the LNP's position has been "unashamedly free-market"

(former Chief Development Officer, VicUrban), while Labor governments have a “greater understanding about the role of government and the need for government to undertake certain actions to initiate and catalyse the market,” (Planning Manager, Government of Victoria). Widespread changes to the state government’s land development agency responsible for RCD, Places Victoria (formerly VicUrban), best reflect the impact of the change of administration and of the different parties’ political ideology. In 2011, the “project team was decimated largely because of the change of politics” at the time from a team of approximately 25 to one (former Chief Development Officer, VicUrban). The change of government meant a “change of focus and orientation and philosophy” (former Place Manager, VicUrban) that saw public spending commitments redirected. According to one senior local government representative:

...the most noticeable change that we've seen is in the change of government. This whole thing kicked off under the Bracks (Labor) Government and was continued under the Brumby (Labor) Government. Then, we saw a change to the Baillieu-Napthine (LNP) Government, and...the support didn't necessarily drop away, but didn't grow at the rate that we expected it would grow. Since the return of the Andrews government, we've seen...okay, not a direct involvement, but we see greater scope and opportunity for further government investment in the activity centre. So, we'll probably see again, not the same level of growth that occurred in Bracks Brumby, but you know a bit of growth again, things like preparedness to talk about more government jobs coming into the activity centre, more white collared jobs coming into the activity centre, an openness to thinking about some of the unfunded infrastructure.

The other factor that has affected public spending patterns in Central Dandenong is each Government's drive to accumulate political capital. Interviewees explained that public investment from the State Government for the revitalisation program has slowed significantly since 2005 for two reasons. First, because the revitalisation effort has been sufficiently stimulated and now it is a matter of local government responsibility to carry forward the process. Second, because the pattern of discretionary public spending is directed toward marginal electorates in a bid to shape political fortunes. As one ex-member of parliament explained, while “budgets are mostly fixed, you might have around a billion to spend a year (on)... capital works. It's no surprise that most of it lands on marginal seats. All governments, you know, have that. So what tends to get left in the safe LNP seats and the safe Labor seats tends to be the crumbs.” In discussing a decision to locate a public office outside of Central Dandenong under a LNP administration, one former VicUrban representative highlighted that “Central Dandenong was a Labor seat so they (the LNP) didn't give a damn; and then here's Frankston, a swinging sort of seat, and if they can appease the locals by saying okay to an office down there, they will prioritise that.” Or as another interviewee from the private sector explained:

Dandenong does all the heavy lifting in an area with a number of intergenerational unemployment issues. It really doesn't get the support of both the Federal and the State Governments. Part of its problem is that it's a safe Labor seat. So what that does is the libs (LNP) tend to ignore us and Labor tends to take us for granted.

The Impact of Changing Public Policy and Spending on Collaboration

Both the shift towards targeted, place-based planning and fluctuating public spending commitments under different administrations have affected the nature of collaboration between actors in the revitalisation effort in Central Dandenong. First, our research found that the partnership between the main actors in governing Central Dandenong, the local and state governments,² has been generally fruitful throughout the project period, with some abrupt changes (for example as a result of the above-mentioned contraction of Places Victoria in 2011) and tensions at different points. Second, horizontal integration between areas of state government departments and agencies has been managed through a variety of formal structures, though has relied heavily on the individual skills and strategies of experienced bureaucrats. Third, as there has been a “seismic change” in the role of government “from a provider of big services to an advocacy role, to facilitate collaborative partnerships as a strategic investor” (representative, CoGD), new actors and new collaborations between the State and non-government sector have emerged. Lastly, interviewees commented on the increased role played by private and community sector actors within the context of the RCD project, through direct involvement in project participation processes, advocacy and direct service provision. This final characteristic of collaboration has seen a strong role for culturally diverse groups and their representative organisations.

² The Federal Government played a small, direct role in contributing to the revitalisation process between 2007 and 2013 through the Nation Building Stimulus Plan and Regional Australian Development Fund which supported Council's Chamber development, a pool redevelopment and a trigeneration building project in the area through an energy efficiency program.

In the context of the RCD project, the role of local government and the nature of collaboration with the State Government has varied, with the Council autonomously initiating and implementing some activities, but also operating at times as an implementation body of the State. The pivotal adjustment to be managed was the initial transfer of planning powers to the State Government and the omission of local government participation in the original planning of financial decision-making about the project. Some interviewees expressed that this unequal footing and the downward coordination from the State to local government presented some tensions and challenges, though these were largely overcome by effective interpersonal relationships, by “goodwill, partnerships and conversations as the unofficial part of a project” (representative, CoCG). From the local government perspective, one senior local government representative expressed that the relationship with VicUrban and State Government departments in the RCD project has:

“...always been good. It's often been tense, but you know, such is partnerships and relationships that if there weren't constructive tensions I think we wouldn't have got as good an outcome as we have. But there were times when... we felt they probably lapsed into a mode of believing they were the local government authority, coming in and investing so heavily in this activity centre, they were starting to want to make decisions or give advice in relation to how we should deliver services in the activity centre. And yeah, we've been very careful to say, “Well, I appreciate your views and input, but that's our job.” And like a lot of things in life, they have a role, we have a role, and there's a bit of an overlap and there's a shade of grey between those potentially overlapping roles. So, that's where the tension is of getting some of those things sorted out. But...it's always been a mature relationship, we've respected one another's views and we've seen it through, to the point, where I think they've essentially pulled out of the activity centre now. They've no longer got a role and I think that's a good thing. They've realised that the council is here to actually now build upon the good work that they've done.”

Horizontal collaboration between state government actors was formalised through one high level project control board, internal project review groups, interdepartmental and other specific committees and working groups (for example, on infrastructure, education or consultation as well as with integrated local-state “ground” teams). A range of interviewees commented that these project groups were central to project delivery in terms of overcoming ‘silo’ approaches. For example, as one former VicUrban representative suggested:

“...We made sure we got different groups into the room to cover different areas, like community safety. You would have the Department of Human Services, Department of Justice, migrant groups, the police, etc. And so everybody was starting to hear one another and mix together. Normally, you know, government departments can be very much pillars...I think that was the beauty of Revitalising Central Dandenong.”

Nevertheless, both the VAGO evaluation (2012) and selected interviewees commented that the formal structures and process for collaboration suffered from some weaknesses in terms of problem resolution, accountability, articulation between certain areas of government and transparency at different times. In this context, less formalised approaches to collaboration have been paramount to delivering the RCD project, relying on the skills of individual bureaucrats like trust and relationship building, leadership, communication and facilitation skills. The project:

“...relied on the likes of (certain people) knowing who the decision-makers were within government, knowing how to get to them, have influence and how to get the decisions made...because we didn't have that well-functioning formal structure, what it came down to was three guys, four guys who just were on the same page and who knew how to work the system to get things done...the fact that we had very capable individuals at the coalface meant that you could overcome a number of the hurdles that you invariably face in these projects. If you didn't have the right individuals in those spaces, some of those hurdles could have just stopped things dead in their tracks” (former VicUrban representative).

In a context of ‘hybrid’ governance and reduced government spending, new collaborations between the State and non-government sector have also emerged. The RCD project and other initiatives in Central Dandenong have involved different kinds of associations between government and non-government actors. Partnerships have been formed for the purposes of project delivery with the private sector, such as land developers and business owners in Central Dandenong. In fact, the original business case for RCD set out clear objectives to leverage the State Government investment through attracting private partners and to “tie in really strongly with the existing economic development resources” such as the South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance and the then Dandenong Retail and Traders Association. Engagement between government and community sector groups has also

been a feature of revitalisation in Central Dandenong, for example through formal consultation, in aspects of project delivery and also advocacy by non-government entities. One feature of collaboration between State and non-government actors in the revitalisation process has been the focus on place-making for cultural diversity.

Cultural Diversity and Collaboration in Central Dandenong

Our preliminary research has found that cultural diversity in Central Dandenong has played a role in defining the way collaborations between the State and non-government actors has occurred and, in turn, the outcomes of urban revitalisation. The main pillar that supports cultural diversity as a focus of revitalisation is widespread validation of multiculturalism by government and business locally. The CoCG has official plans that position Council as a champion and leader of diversity. "Diversity is not seen as a threat; it's a great thing. And we want to praise it and celebrate it and remove any stigma of it. It is a very clear message" (representative, CoGD). At the state government level, multiculturalism has received bipartisan support, effected through recognition-based projects (e.g. Little India in Central Dandenong) as well as services that encourage integration in the community (e.g. through multicultural liaison officers in the police force or health services for culturally diverse groups). We have also found that the local business community sees cultural diversity as important in offering and sustaining a diverse and resilient retail market. Interviewees highlighted the value of cultural diversity as an element of community building as well.

In addition to the general support for multiculturalism, interviewees suggested that existing socio-demographic features of Greater Dandenong support mutual understanding, a basis for effective collaboration. On the one hand, the fact that the majority of the population has a migrant background means that "the sheer weight of difference has helped that there's nobody is a majority and the norm is you come from somewhere else." This provides a "starting point for community interaction" (Federal MP). On the other hand, some interviewees suggested that the geographic mixing in neighbourhoods of cultural groups also avoids the creation of 'ghettos' and supports mutual understanding and acceptance of difference. This aligns with Lobo's research (2010) into 'everyday multiculturalism' in Dandenong, in which she found that "everyday encounters in the local neighbourhood provide the potential to blur fixed ethnic boundaries and contribute to interethnic understanding and a sense of belonging" (p.86). The local urban environment was also identified to support conviviality between cultural groups through shared public spaces, such as the market, train station, plazas, retail strips, theatre and library, as well as specific cultural precincts, such as the Afghan Bazaar or Little India, which act both as familiar sites for gathering by cultural groups and draw in other members of the public to learn about specific cultures.

People from culturally diverse backgrounds have access to some services locally that help to expose them to opportunities for collaboration and in some cases equip them for participation in State-led engagement efforts. Greater Dandenong has one of the highest used public libraries in Australia and migrant families are the main patrons, benefiting from access to books, internet, support groups, activities and events. The Council also offers one of the largest youth services and counselling group in Victoria. It offers services through its neighbourhood centres and other facilities in multiple languages or access to translation services. The State Government also provides multiple services in Dandenong, as well as organises events and activities for cultural groups. Other organisations funded by government, such as the TAFE and Migrant Resources Centre, also offer services to support diversity and integration, such as English language classes. From this foundation of supported diversity, distinct modes of interaction between actors have occurred in pursuing the revitalisation of Central Dandenong.

Governments involved in revitalisation projects in Central Dandenong have recognised the value of cultural diversity in 'place-making' and have tailored engagement strategies around this. According to the CEO of CoGD, the revitalisation process was "obviously going to build off the success of cultural diversity." Community engagement occurred at different times from the core project's inception, in order to develop a 'shared vision' for revitalisation, through to implementation, which occurred in different forums. During the initial phase, VicUrban ran group specific consultations such as with young people, traders, women and specific cultural groups. Once plans were drafted, further community consultation was conducted, for example through a specific campaign ('Your Ideas for the New City'), through group based engagement and through opening up submission writing opportunities for feedback. According to some of the interviewees, 'active' local groups, particularly cultural groups for example from local Afgani and Indian communities, where "a bit easier" to engage with in this process "because they already had an organised approach to things" (representative, CoGD).

A key example of the way the formal engagement process responded to local cultural diversity is the way food has been used. On the one hand, the process of making food and eating together has been used by Council as a “mechanism of community engagement. In other words, food is recognised as a social unifier to bring people together” (representative, CoGD). It is used by government as a medium to bring people of different cultures together, support interaction and build understanding. “If you make some flat bread, you all get sit around and talk. And so, we’ve used it as a mechanism of engagement. In other words, food is recognised as a...social unifier to bring together” (representative, CoGD). On the other hand, and in part as a result of the consultation program, food has also been used in place ‘marketing’ and in creating and growing a local tourism industry through collaboration between the local, State Governments and different cultural groups, creating places that offer specific cultural precincts or activities, such as the Afghan Bazaar or Little India.

Another way that the State and cultural groups have collaborated during the revitalisation process of the last decade is through formal ‘community partnerships.’ A recent example of a ‘community partnership’ is between the Interfaith Network of Greater Dandenong (INGD) and Council, as well as separately under a different partnership with the Office of Multicultural Affairs of the State Government, to improve settlement processes and integration of former refugees in Dandenong. The INGD brings together leaders from the local Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Sikh faiths to share information and experiences in community. Their aim is to promote “understanding, respect and tolerance for each other’s beliefs by living together in peace and goodwill” (INGD, 2016). Since 2014 Council has funded a full-time officer to run the INGD and provides office space for meetings. By formally creating and supporting a partnership, Council is able to reach out to recognised community leaders for advice on what to do in improving services for new migrants, or in developing culturally appropriate plans for disability and health. The INGD also assists Council in developing community statements or in providing culturally diverse and appropriate ceremonies at events. At the State level, the INGD has a range of partnerships, for example with the Police for inter-faith training, the Justice Department to support research into family violence and with the Office of Multiculturalism.

In addition to Government led engagement and partnerships, our research found that some local cultural groups are increasingly well organised and able to influence urban policy through political means. Specific traders or community groups have increased in number of the recent decade and are able to influence local policy through “advocacy, lobby and engagement...they’ve grouped up and they have a strength that was unimagined in the 1980s when the Indo-Chinese groups came. By grouping up, they have developed a voice in the community” (Federal MP). For example, there are specific groups, such as the Vietnamese Association of Victoria, Little India Traders Group and Afghani Traders, which are active and have forged pathways to influence provide support and influence public policy. One measure of success of the mobilisations by different cultural groups is that community leaders from diverse cultural communities have been elected as Councillors and Mayor in Dandenong, providing a unique opportunity to influence the direction of policy in support of multiculturalism. In fact, the mayors of Greater Dandenong over the last two decades have had a variety of faiths, including Buddhism, Islam, Jewish and Christian.

Conclusion

A recipe for different modes of collaboration between actors has emerged in Dandenong that rests on the particular value of cultural diversity. Beginning from a position of widespread support for multiculturalism and mutual understanding in the community linked to the distinctive morphology and socio-ethnic functioning of the city, multiple forms of engagement and collaboration between actors is an important part of the revitalisation effort in Dandenong. These have included collaboration between government and non-government actors in the design of cultural precincts, as well as in the evolution of political action led by cultural groups to influence the trajectory of urban policy. Our research highlights the parallel paths taken by researchers engaged in analysing collaborative governance or urban multiculturalism. We propose that there is considerable value in exploring urban multiculturalism as a key ingredient and/or outcome of collaborative governance. This requires us to pay particular attention to the role of context in shaping what is possible and being shaped by the various actors engaged.

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